



## Informational Texts and the Common Core Standards: What Are We Talking about, Anyway?

Beth Maloch and Randy Bomer

Everyone reading this column is likely to be aware of the recent push in education policy toward a curriculum that requires students to read and write more informational texts. At the time of this writing, teachers in the 45 states that have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) undoubtedly also are aware that the college-readiness standards, the grade-level standards, the guidelines for publishers, and the now-emerging assessments all emphasize students working with informational texts. The policy trend is not limited to that 90% of the states, however. In Texas, for instance, new standards rooted in a notion of college readiness, like the CCSS, have also tipped the balance toward more expository, nonfiction text in the reading and writing curriculum.

In this month's column, we want to help readers become acquainted with the state of the field in this area, to get clearer about what has been demonstrated with evidence, what has been argued with or without evidence, and what gaps still exist in what we know about children, literacy, and these texts that take up the position of informing their readers about the world. In our review of the literature, we found enough material to fill two columns—this one, and the upcoming July issue on Insights and Inquiries. So here, we lay the groundwork for our later discussion of instruction by working through the various ways that researchers and CCSS writers have defined terms like *informational texts* and *nonfiction*. Our purpose is to help provide clarity on what researchers mean when they say *informational texts* and, more important, why we as teachers and researchers must consider and understand

the different ways this term is defined and used within the CCSS.

### The Research

There is nothing new about a call for attention to non-fiction texts in earlier years of children's schooling. After all, as we demonstrated in our column about the history of this journal (Maloch, Bomer, & Burke, 2012), many of our current obsessions as a field have long been with us. Thirty years ago, for example, Applebee (1984) described elementary literacy education as "reliance on primarily time-ordered or descriptive modes of presentation" and secondary literacy education as moving "toward more analytic modes of presentation" (p. 185). Newkirk (1989) described this split in levels of schooling as "the Great Divide approach to literacy," in which elementary students are asked to write "creative" sorts of texts, and secondary students are suddenly asked to write exposition and argument. Newkirk went on to show that much in very young children's writing could be seen as the beginnings of categorization, abstraction, logical organization, argument, and analysis. Therefore, there is nothing necessarily or naturally developmental in this split; it's apparently a product of unquestioned curricular habits.

Similarly, Chall and Jacobs (1983) suggested three decades ago that this split occurs even earlier in students' school careers, contributing to what is known as the "fourth-grade slump." Sometimes this split is explained as a shift from "learning to read" to "reading to learn"; the assumption is that children read stories until they have achieved fluency, after which they are able to use reading as a



tool for learning academic content. Duke and Tower (2004) contend that these “phases” represent a false dichotomy and argue, like others (Newkirk, 1989; Pappas, 1993), that children should be reading and writing in varied modes of discourse from the earliest years of schooling. Young readers, these researchers argue, need to explore all kinds of texts, and young writers need opportunities to experience a range of texts as they read, compose, and communicate for different purposes.

Educational researchers have intensified their call for more informational text in the elementary classroom over the last 15 to 20 years. In the literature-based movement of the 1980s and ‘90s, educators worked toward building up literature inside elementary classrooms. Researchers (Kamberelis, 1998; Kamil & Lane, 1997; Moss, 2008; Pappas, 1993) noted, perhaps as a byproduct of educators’ faith in the importance of story, the prominence of fictional texts inside of primary classrooms. These researchers suggested there could be problems associated with limiting students’ literacy diets to fiction, and they called for more inclusion of non-fiction or informational texts.

Nell Duke (2000a) offered further evidence of the scarcity of informational texts in her study of 20 first-grade classrooms, finding few informational texts on shelves (less than 10% of the classroom libraries) or walls (less than 3% of the print environment), and an average of only 3.6 minutes a day devoted to activities related to these types of texts. Her study (Duke, 2000b) also exposed a

worrisome disparity between classrooms serving higher socioeconomic students and lower socioeconomic students; classrooms from low SES areas averaged only 1.9 minutes per day with informational texts, and half of classrooms in this category spent no time at all. Since that time, studies (Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010; Moss, 2008) have indicated that the presence of expository text is growing (slowly) in primary classrooms, but substantial

discrepancies between narrative (mostly fictional stories) and expository texts still exist.

This discrepancy has implications for children. Research indicates that although young children are capable of making sense of and crafting information when given the opportunity (Duke & Kays, 1998; Newkirk, 1989; Pappas, 1993), students are typically more able to craft stories than information (Kamberelis, 1998). Kamberelis (1998) found that this difference is at least partly a result of the literacy diets of most primary-age children. Children write what they read. If they read (and hear) lots and lots of stories, they are better at composing stories. If, on the other hand, they read (and hear) stories, but also information books, procedural texts, and feature articles, they are more likely to learn the conventions of those genres and be able to compose according to those purposes. If we expect our students to write for any number of purposes, to be able to shift their composing to match the needs of the moment, or effectively communicate according to real-world purposes, we must provide and teach around texts of varying kinds so that they have models and mentors for their own composing (Duke & Kays, 1998; Kamberelis, 1998; 1999; Pappas, 1993; Tower, 2002).

Similarly, Duke and Roberts (2010) argue that “rather than being a unitary construct, reading comprehension is best seen as a collection of processes that are substantially differentiated by genre” (p. 75). That is, comprehension is genre-specific; to make sense of texts, readers employ comprehension strategies in particular ways for particular types of text. The paucity of expository texts in elementary classrooms, then, can lead to students’ lack of familiarity of the structural conventions of expository texts and too few opportunities for them to investigate reading strategies that are appropriate with these texts. The final argument, and perhaps the most important one, is that the addition of informational texts to classrooms adds to the possibilities of young children learning about the world around them—building content knowledge that can influence their future sense-making of texts and also build their knowledge about the world.

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## Defining “Informational Text”

Before we can move into what research says about informational texts (coming up in July), we need to spend some time pinning down just how folks are defining *informational texts*, and how this fits or doesn't fit with how these texts are discussed within the CCSS. *Informational text* is a common term, but it can be confusing. All kinds of texts include information, of course, and lots of different genres can be used to inform readers or can be read in order to develop knowledge and understanding. Here, we'll first consider the ways informational texts have been defined in the research literature, then we'll return to the way they are talked about inside of the CCSS and other state standards. We hope that this order will help clarify some of the terminology as a way of making sense of the CCSS document.

In reviewing research for this column, we found both similarities and differences in the ways researchers were talking about informational text. These differences are significant if educators are to have a clear understanding of what research has and has not demonstrated. A number of researchers, but not all, use nonfiction as an umbrella term to include all texts that present factual information (e.g., Duke & Tower, 2004; Moss, 2008). It is important to clarify right from the start, of course, that fiction and nonfiction are not genres; rather, they denote a binary about referentiality to the world. Genres are forms or types of text with a particular purpose, and particular shapes and features to accomplish those purposes (Duke, Caughlin, Juzwik, & Martin, 2012). Inside of fiction, for example, exist multiple genres, including fantasy, historical fiction, and realistic fiction, to name a few. Inside of nonfiction, you find narratively structured genres like biography and historical narrative; you also find genres structured by exposition, like arguments, explanations, and articles packed with facts (which often get called “informational writing”). These expository types of texts are organized categorically, moving from one subtopic to another, like from “where they live” to “what they eat,” rather than being organized in time, like stories and biographies are.

From this discussion, it is already apparent that

the category of nonfiction hides much complexity, one of the most important distinctions being the one between narrative and expository texts. These text type differences make for very distinct experiences for readers. They affect our instruction as well, for when we lump all nonfiction together and treat the very different texts as if they aren't different at all, we're likely to confuse our students. Understanding these differences as teachers, then, is a first step toward planning appropriate instructional experiences for our students. Bradley and Donovan (2010) argue:

A teacher knowledgeable of genre elements, features, and organizational patterns will be able to routinely direct young students' attention to them during read-alouds within meaningful contexts, to assess student compositions for the ways in which the students apply these insights, and to invite students to examine their own texts for elements, features, and organization, as well. (p. 259)

For these very reasons, researchers have worked to clarify these differences. Duke and Tower (2004) divide nonfiction into five categories of texts: informational texts, concept books, procedural texts, biographies, and reference materials. Their use of the term *informational text*, then, is narrower than the way some people use it, including the CCSS and other state standards. We think this restricted definition is a good thing in that it brings more precision to thinking about text types in classrooms.

The definition that Duke (2000a) uses is “text written with the primary purpose of conveying information about the natural and social world (typically from someone presumed to be more knowledgeable on the subject to someone presumed to be less so) and having particular text features to accomplish this purpose” (p. 205). By defining informational texts in this way, she does not include more narratively structured texts like biographies (biographies are about people, not about the world) or procedural texts (procedural texts do not explain the world; they give directions). In her most recent book, she and her colleagues (Duke, et al., 2012) extend this work by differentiating texts as sets of genres. They identify five sets of genres (including those that fall under the headings of fiction and

nonfiction) found inside of classrooms: narrative, expository, procedural, persuasive, and dramatic.

Researchers have worked to make these distinctions between text types clear by considering texts' purposes, features, and structures (Donovan and Smolkin, 2002; Duke et al., 2012; Moss, 2008). For example, a number of text genres fall into what Donovan and Smolkin (2002) call nonnarrative-informational. *Nonnarrative-informational texts* are topic-oriented texts and use expository structures. The term "nonnarrative" helps contrast these texts

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from ones that are structured as narratives, such as biography, autobiography, and historical narratives. Kletzien and Dreher (2004), in fact, call this category expository-informational to be transparent about its structure. Sometimes called "reports" by linguists, these texts tend to focus on general classes of things, rather than specific instances. Because of this focus on more generalized concepts, the tense is generally present or time-less (e.g., "all snakes hunt prey to eat"), and vocabulary is technical.

Inside this category of texts, researchers have studied particular text types. Kamberelis (1998), for example, examined the ways young children acquired understandings about the scientific report (in contrast to their learning about story and poetry). Wollman-Bonilla (2000) was interested in how students' writing fit within four genres: report, experiment-report, experiment-procedure, and explanation. Thus, even inside of this smaller category of nonnarrative informational text (narrower than *nonfiction* or even *informational text*), there exists a range of genres written for an array of purposes.

One type of text that sometimes fits in this category, the information book, has received particular attention in the field because of its growing prominence in classrooms. Information trade books are children's books that are mainly designed to teach their readers about the real world (Saul & Dieckman, 2005). While information books have been

defined more broadly, Pappas's (2006) recent analysis of information books focused on books that are structured by exposition. In her analysis, she identified four elements of information books that she called obligatory: topic presentation, descriptive attributes, characteristic events, and final summary, along with several optional elements. If books included these elements, she labeled them "typical" information books, and Pappas argued strongly for the use of such texts in classrooms because of the ways they exposed students to expository structures. She contrasted these with what she called "atypical" information books—hybrid texts that include both narrative and expository structures.

These hybrid texts, or what Donovan and Smolkin (2002) call *dual purpose* texts, are texts that combine more than one text type. Donovan and Smolkin assert that these texts:

- (a) are intended by their authors to present facts and provide a story, and (b) use a dual format that allows them to be accessed by readers like a nonnarrative information book or like a storybook. (p. 507)

Donovan and Smolkin (2002) suggest that although information is sometimes found in the running storyline, more often than not the content appears in the insets and diagrams. Readers would need to draw on strategies for both narrative and expository texts as they engaged with hybrid texts like these. The most common example of these texts is the Magic School Bus series by Joanna Cole (e.g., *The Magic School Bus on the Ocean Floor*, Cole, 1992), although there exists a range of texts that employ some sort of hybridization of narrative and expository structures (see Pappas, 2006, for a typology of hybrid texts). Pappas (2006), as mentioned earlier, cautioned teachers not to include only hybrid texts in their classrooms. She recommended use of more typical, expository texts in addition to these hybrid texts and narratively structured books.

Clearly, there are variations in the ways in which researchers have defined *informational texts*. The work of Duke and colleagues (Duke & Tower, 2004; Duke, et al., 2012; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007), Donovan and Smolkin (2002; 2006), and Moss (2008) provide a way forward in



this area through their careful attempts to define the categories they use. All of these researchers focus the reader's attention on the different ways text types shape children's reading and writing. Further, Pappas (2006) argued in her work that the most important aspect to attend to in thinking about these texts is the talk around the book and nature of its use. In our upcoming column, we take up this notion in more detail as we explore the research that has been done related to instruction about and around informational texts. For now, though, having considered how researchers are talking about informational texts, we turn back to the Common Core State Standards to work through the language used in this document.

## CCSS and Informational Texts

In contrast to recent research, the CCSS employ the term *informational texts* as a broad term, including biographies and autobiographies; "books about history, social studies, science, and the arts"; "technical texts, including directions, forms, and information displayed in graphs, charts, or maps"; and "digital sources on a range of topics" (p. 31). They direct special attention to what they call *literary nonfiction*. Not defined in the Standards, *literary nonfiction* (also called *creative nonfiction*) typically refers to a range of genres that attempt to represent the real world while also employing characteristics of literature, such as interesting and beautiful authorial style, rich characterizations (including the author's persona), metaphorical as well as literal meanings, and sometimes complex and indeterminate themes. Literary nonfiction often contains at least some narrative and may be written as the story of an investigation to learn about the subject matter. Many, perhaps most, memoirs are literary nonfiction (other than those written by political figures and the like), and so are many biographies. Essays in the tradition of Montaigne are literary nonfiction, as are more recent forms of personal essay that came of age in columns, commentaries, and magazine features (see Bradway & Hesse, 2009).

The CCSS's use of *literary nonfiction* across the Standards may be hard for many discriminat-

ing educators to follow. In one part, they contrast literary nonfiction with "historical, scientific, and technical texts," seeming to suggest that literary nonfiction includes those texts that are narrative in structure, but not those that feature exposition (p. 31). Later, though, they include as examples of literary nonfiction, "subgenres of exposition, argument, and functional text in the form of personal essays, speeches, opinion pieces, essays about art or literature, biographies, memoirs, journalism, and historical, scientific, technical, or economic accounts (including digital sources written for a broader audience)" (p. 57).

In this long list of genres, the authors include texts that explain, argue, narrate, or perform some combination of those functions. So here, the term "literary nonfiction" could be taken to include almost all the different kinds of informational texts. Earlier in the Standards, however, the authors list literary nonfiction as a "special category of informational texts," so it does not seem to be the case that the Standards' authors view these synonymously. Educators may be frustrated when trying to figure out the contradictions in an authoritarian document, but it is understandable that the writers of the CCSS document got tangled up, as so many people do, in these forms and functions. Perhaps the lesson to carry away is not a definitive final word on what texts are in or out, but rather an understanding that students can be engaged in an interesting and perpetually uncompleted inquiry process into the different types of text that exist in the world. That can happen if teachers open the textual world in their classrooms to a wider array of text types, making sure to offer texts that explain, inform, and argue in a range of ways.

## So Now What?

At the end of this discussion of terms and definitions, our recommendation is to not get bogged down in the terms used inside of the CCSS (like we did), but to focus instead on the range of text types included inside the Standards. We hope that teachers will take the inevitable taxonomies coming out from publishers, state departments of education,

and test consultants with substantial grains—no, handfuls—of salt. These categories are not fixed or agreed-upon, even among people who have each spent years researching them. It is probably fitting to keep in mind the descriptions of classrooms that have *so little* informational texts in them—of any kind—and to beef up classroom libraries with appropriate resources. But to come up with a taxonomy of fixed categories that correspond to a set of standards? Good luck. Instead, perhaps the most educative stance would be to open up the world of *books that teach* to students, and to involve them in the categorizing, to ask them to discriminate among the many types of books that purport to tell the truth about the world.

In this column, we hope we have begun to break open this broad category of text that some call *nonfiction* and some call *informational text*. Inside of this very broad category are genres or text types that vary widely from one another in purpose, structure, and mode. We argue that a category this broad, while perhaps useful in the ways it draws attention to a whole set of texts that have been largely ignored in primary classrooms, actually masks the variety within it. We hope that this column helps educators and consumers of educational research build an awareness of the ways that *informational texts*, as a term, can be thrown about in all sorts of ways.

For teachers, we suggest that it will be worth their while to ask questions when that term is used, and to dig deeper and ask more questions when they read about it. For researchers, we call for greater precision when talking about the varied text types in use inside of classrooms. When using a term like *informational text*, what exactly do researchers mean to include? Are there other terms that might be more specific and more transparent of their meaning? Greater precision in the use of terms like these can only strengthen our understandings of what research is actually telling us about children's use of and learning about a range of text types found in classrooms—those meant to tell stories, those meant to convey information, and those meant to change our minds.

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**Beth Maloch** is an associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin and can be reached at [bmaloach@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:bmaloach@austin.utexas.edu). **Randy Bomer** is a professor at the University of Texas at Austin and can be reached at [rbomer@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:rbomer@austin.utexas.edu).

## MAKING THE CASE: RESEARCH SUPPORT FOR VALUED PRACTICES

In recent years, schools have been under increasing pressure to teach to the test, often resulting in a narrowing of the curriculum that squeezes out teaching methods that invite children into literacy and critical thinking in more engaging ways. We regularly see teachers having to defend their instructional decisions and practices to administrators, colleagues, parents, and district-level overseers, drawing on research as evidence. To that end, we are adding to the Research and Policy column, where appropriate, a concise summary of research relevant to each particular column. As we are imagining it, teachers might copy these summaries to have as a ready resource, with a bulleted list of claims on the front and a reference list on the back. We hope these summaries will be useful to teachers making decisions in their classrooms and defending those decisions to others. The front and back of this issue's one-pager are on the next two pages.

—Beth Maloch and Randy Bomer

MAKING THE CASE: RESEARCH SUPPORTING INFORMATIONAL  
TEXT USE IN PRIMARY CLASSROOMS

Research indicates that informational texts are underrepresented in many elementary classrooms, especially at the primary level. Young children are capable of learning about and learning from informational texts when given the opportunity. Students benefit from instruction about these texts and occasions to read and learn from them. When given these kinds of opportunities, students grow in their comprehension of such texts and in their use of these genres, strategies, and structures in their own writing.

- Early childhood and primary classrooms should make large numbers of informational texts available to children (Duke, 2000a; Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010; Moss, 2008).
- Young children are capable of learning the features and structures of expository text (Duke & Kays, 1998; Kamberelis, 1998; Newkirk, 1989; Pappas, 1993).
- Every classroom should have a rich classroom library with an ample supply of varied kinds of texts, including expository texts and narratives, fiction and nonfiction. Teachers and students need immediate access to a rich array of stories, information books, magazines and newspapers, essays, persuasive texts, biographies, historical narratives, and procedural texts (Duke, 2000a; Duke, 2000b; Kamberelis, 1998).
- Children are motivated by informational texts, often choosing to read them when given a chance. Because of this motivational or engaging quality, for some children informational texts can be a way into overall literacy development (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Guthrie & Alao, 1997).
- Exposure to and instruction around particular text types result in students' acquisition of those text forms in their own writing and in their reading (Pappas, 1993; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007; Tower, 2002).
- Teachers should have professional development on purposes, structures, and forms of informational, expository texts. This professional development might include time to read such texts with other teachers and discuss how they work (Martin & Duke, 2010; Williams, 2005).

On the back of this sheet, you will find the above-cited references. For a more extended discussion, see Maloch and Bomer's article in the January 2013 issue of *Language Arts*.



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